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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4431
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 9487
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 6391
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 4438
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3236
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0042
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 3327
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0396
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2406
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 6946
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4787
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: RESETTLEMENT MINISTER VOWS NO REPEAT OF
MUSLIM DISPLACEMENT FROM LTTE-DOMINATED AREAS

REF: A) COLOMBO 1601 B) COLOMBO 1399 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake for reasons 1.4(b,d).

1. (C) Ambassador Blake met with Minister of Resettlement A. Rishad Bathihudeen October 4 to discuss Sri Lanka's critical internally displaced persons (IDP) problem. The Resettlement Ministry is responsible for 300,000 pre-ceasefire conflict displaced persons and an additional 180,000-240,000 since hostilities between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) escalated in April. Bathihudeen said his ministry has already assisted 40,000 of the latest IDPs to return to their homes in the east, denying public criticism that the GSL pressured civilians to return before they felt safe doing so. Of the 300,000 (source: UNHCR) so-called "permanent" IDPs - those the Minister describes as displaced to IDP camps since 1990 - 95%, predominantly Muslim, were evicted from the north and east by an LTTE ultimatum. (Note: In 2002, the UNHCR estimated there were 800,000 conflict IDPs in Sri Lanka.) Many fled to the northwest coastal area of Puttalam where they have lived in 141 camps for the past 16 years. A \$32 million grant by the World Bank will support a housing scheme in Puttalam for these IDPs.

2. (C) Minister Bathihudeen explained that because the LTTE evicted Muslims in the early 1990s from Mannar, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Jaffna, he would not allow Muslims to be forced out of Muttur indefinitely. He lamented, "One minority has evicted another minority. The Muslims are not a party to this war." He praised President Rajapaksa's leadership in "resettling the Muttur IDPs (ref B) within a month." The Minister described an informal working relationship and "rapport" with the LTTE through the Government Agents (GA) in Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Vavuniya, Mannar and Jaffna districts, noting: "Without the permission of the LTTE, people can't resettle."

3. (C) Minister Bathihudeen expressed enthusiastic appreciation for USAID's role in assisting IDPs in Puttalam and the east, and asked that the United States continue to make this issue a priority for aid funding. He noted that IDP Muslim youths are "restless, educated, and may take up arms if their economic problems are not solved." The

Ambassador said that he would like to travel to
GSL-administered IDP camps to see the ground situation and
how the U.S. might help to address the problem.

BLAKE